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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000534

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SUBJECT: CHAVEZ AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH: DUELING GOSPELS

REF: A. CARACAS 000256

[1](#)B. CARACAS 000206

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Classified By: ACTING POLITICAL COUNSELOR DANIEL LAWTON,
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. President Chavez recently renewed his public attacks on the Catholic Church by contrasting the attitude of his "good friend" San Cristobal Bishop Mario Moronta with the "oligarchs" of Venezuela's Episcopal Conference. Chavez highlighted Bishop Moronta's exhortation in a pastoral letter that Catholics participate in the "design of a new society" to imply a Church endorsement of his "socialist" plan of government. Cardinal Jorge Urosa Savino believes Chavez' remarks are part of an ongoing government effort to divide the Catholic Church in Venezuela. Senior Catholic clergy continue to criticize Chavez' incorporation of elements of Christianity to justify his socialist plan of government, as well as Chavez' growing authoritarianism. Church-state tensions are likely to continue, if not intensify, as the BRV pursues educational reform. End Summary.

Chavez, the Church, and the "New Man"

[1](#)2. (U) During his February 26 "Alo, Presidente" radio broadcast, President Chavez lauded San Cristobal Bishop Mario Moronta's January 25 pastoral letter to Catholic clergy and parishioners in the western state of Tachira. Reading long excerpts directly from the eight-page, single-spaced letter, Chavez stressed that Moronta called on Catholics to participate in the public debate on Chavez' plans for "Socialism in the 21st Century." Seizing on Moronta's recommendation that Catholics participate in the "design of a new society," Chavez insisted that the preferred model is "socialism, because capitalism only guarantees common evil or evil for the majority." Chavez also asserted that while Jesus proclaimed the formation of the "new man," that was not enough because "we must create the new man" through the "revolutionary praxis."

[1](#)3. (U) During the same broadcast, Chavez fielded a call from a Venezuelan priest, Vidal Atencio, who said Bishop Moronta's letter should be discussed widely because he addresses issues that the Venezuelan Catholic Church is avoiding. Atencio accused the Church hierarchy of deliberately suppressing Moronta's letter by not publishing it on the Episcopal

Conference's website (Note: Moronta is not an Episcopal Conference office-holder.) Chavez stressed to Atencio that cooperation and solidarity, not traditional charity from the wealthy, are needed to build a better society.

¶4. (SBU) Chavez' public praise for Bishop Moronta's pastoral letter fueled considerable follow-on attention in the local media. Opposition newspaper "Tal Cual" accused Moronta of supporting Chavez's plan of government, a charge Moronta denies. In fact, Moronta's long letter contains numerous passages indirectly critical of the government. For example, Moronta exhorted the majority to "integrate ideas of minorities" in order to make the political system more "legitimate" and to foster "peaceful coexistence." He noted that the "new man is not the product of social, economic, cultural, or political actions" but rather the result of Christian faith. He also wrote that the Church's focus on the poor can neither be "exclusive nor exclusionary."

¶5. (SBU) At the same time, in endorsing a "process of liberation in all of its dimensions," Moronta also used language that Chavez clearly welcomed. Moronta advocates Church commitment to "an economic system that is more fair, fosters greater solidarity, and is more appropriate to the integrated development of each and every inhabitant of Venezuela." He argues that there is a "historic moment" in Venezuela to advance toward a "new society, fair, fraternal, and peaceful." In particular, he exhorts Catholics to participate fully in a "constructive dialogue" and calls on parishes to promote courses and workshops on the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church.

The Cardinal and Other Clergy

¶6. (C) Cardinal Jorge Urosa told poloff March 2 that Bishop

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Moronta did not coordinate his pastoral letter with the Episcopal Conference, but neither was he required to do so, given the traditional autonomy of Catholic bishops. Cardinal Urosa noted that the length of Bishop Moronta's letter made his message vulnerable to Chavez' and media misinterpretation. He added that Chavez has long engaged in a deliberate strategy of identifying "good" priests while lambasting what Chavez calls the "oligarchic hierarchy." He underscored Chavez' political interest in trying to separate Church leaders from parishioners and to undermine the Church as an independent force in Venezuelan society.

¶7. (SBU) Cardinal Urosa's February 21 Lenten message contained direct rebukes of Chavez' frequent assertions that Jesus was a socialist. The Cardinal stressed in his message that Jesus "did not come to install, promote, support, or justify any political system." He added that "Jesus was not a political leader. Jesus was not a socialist. Jesus cannot be encapsulated by merely human categories, and even less so by political categories." The local media gave prominent attention to the Cardinal's pointed spiritual argument with Chavez.

¶8. (SBU) In addition, Coro Archbishop and First Vice President of the Venezuelan Episcopal Conference Roberto Luckert told the Zenit News Service (regularly carries Holy See and Catholic news) that socialism is not a priority in the 21st century. He also denounced what he called the BRV's lavish and non-transparent foreign aid programs. Opposition newspaper "El Nuevo Pais" published a March 7 op-ed by former Episcopal Conference President and Merida Archbishop Baltazar Porras in which Porras warned against "short term mentalities," remarking that "Who would have told Hitler, when he seemed invincible, how he was going to end?" He also warned against "demonizing supposed enemies," arguing that doing so creates leaders who become "terror-crats."

The U.S. Role

¶9. (C) Cardinal Urosa called on the Ambassador March 8 and expressed appreciation for the attention the Embassy gives to international religious freedom. The Ambassador reminded the Cardinal that the Embassy continues to avoid publicizing such efforts, at the Church's request. He noted that the Secretary, responding to a Congressman's question in an early

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February hearing, said the USG maintains a dialogue with Church officials. The manner in which Coro Archbishop Luckert vehemently denied any Church contacts with U.S. officials was rather clumsy -- not to mention inaccurate -- but the Embassy refrained from responding through the media. The Cardinal thanked the Ambassador for his discretion and commented that Luckert was unaware of the Cardinal's February 1 lunch with the Ambassador (Ref A) and has a tendency to be "overly blunt." The Cardinal would respond to similar questions by noting that he has regular social contacts with diplomatic representatives, including from the United States.

Comment

¶10. (C) The Catholic Church remains one of the few independent institutions with considerable influence in Venezuela capable and occasionally willing to challenge Chavez and his radical plan of government. Consequently, Chavez can be expected to continue to attack Church leaders periodically in an effort to undermine their legitimacy, particularly in the eyes of parishioners in Chavista strongholds. Church-state tensions will likely intensify as the BRV continues to pursue a highly politicized program of education reform. Church leaders continue to voice concerns about proposals that will curtail the autonomy of Catholic private schools and undercut the Church's subsidized partnership with the public educational system. Cardinal Urosa Savino privately regrets that the BRV has not yet made good on promises to have a dialogue with the Church and civil society on educational reform.

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